

Project Background and Description

The Washington State Department of Corrections (DOC) has offered programs in prisons based on evidence or research showing positive results for many years. The state has long emphasized basic education and work-related education among prisoners, but not postsecondary education. The laws regarding educational programs for students in DOC began shifting in 2017 to allow associate degrees. The Act signed into law in 2019 broadened the scope to postsecondary education to the incarcerated. Legislators continued their long-term work of improving educational access and options for those imprisoned in Washington state. This work culminated in some of the most far-reaching legislation to date that will show long-term benefits to those in prison and those re-entering society after imprisonment. The 2021 Legislature has placed all types of postsecondary education within the reach of more incarcerated individuals when they passed “Creating Prison to Postsecondary Education Pathways,” (2SHB 1044). Governor Inslee signed the bill into law effective July 25, 2021, expanding the types of postsecondary education programs eligible for state funding in the Department of Corrections’ (DOC) incarceration facilities. The law changed the focus of OCO to an on-going effort to assess the uptake of postsecondary education in DOC.

Sources of Evidence

Mixed Methods: Qualitative & Quantitative

Qualitative

- Caitlin Robertson, OCO, began conversations in the fall of 2020 and continuing to date with administrators of education services and library services in Washington state prisons. Virtual meetings were held individually and in groups. Participants included Carol Welch, PhD (Volunteer. Member of Monroe Local Family Council), Loretta Taylor (Education Services Administrator, Reentry within the Washington Department of Corrections), Pat Seibert Love (Policy Associate, Basic Education for Adults, State Board for the Community and Technical Colleges), Laura Sherbo (Program Manager, Institutional Library Services, Office of the Secretary of State), Brian Walsh (Senior Program Associate, Vera Institute for Justice), Lauren Knoth, PhD (Senior Research Associate, WSIPP), and Mark Kuzca (Senior Administrator, Reentry within the Washington Department of Corrections).

Among issues discussed were the possible postsecondary education options through Lantern, the Securus educational platform, as well as Pell grants, library access, the

DOC Publications Review Committee, access and options for postsecondary education through the community colleges, how DOC enters education information (including correspondence courses and degrees) into OMNI, the education bill 1044, which became Washington law effective July 2021, with its requirements for operation, cooperation with other entities and reporting requirements to the governor and legislature, and plans for review by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP).

Quantitative

- The Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) contracted with the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) to study participation and completion by incarcerated individuals in postsecondary programs by race, gender, facility. The study, published June 2021, presented an overview of the postsecondary correctional education system in Washington. WSIPP examined patterns of enrollment in and completion of postsecondary programs among incarcerated individuals. There were some racial differences among participation and completion patterns, but the lack of consistent definitions and data coding regarding race and ethnicity between the Department of Corrections (DOC) and the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) made analysis difficult. For example, the authors note they could not present findings of retention or completion by program type and by race. They state, “To the extent possible, we hope to address these limitations in upcoming studies authorized by the 2021 Washington State Legislature in Substitute House Bill 1044.” (Source: Knoth, L., & Fumia, D. (2021). *Postsecondary Program Participation and Completion Patterns among Individuals Incarcerated in Washington State Prisons* (Document Number 21-06-1901). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.
- OCO sent out a survey to tier representatives at the prisons, which included two questions regarding access and options for education in May 2020. Many barriers for access were noted as well as the lack of options to the incarcerated due to facility offerings and restrictions based on sentence length, type of sentence and other factors.
- The decisions made by the DOC Publications Review Board from July 13, 2015 through January 27, 2021 were analyzed. Lack of standard documentation and inconsistent record keeping as well as missing data were problematic. Decisions became more reliant over time on subjective criteria, resulting in greater restrictions.

Anticipated Challenges

- The consolidation and closure of units in prison facilities throughout the state have disrupted educational programming. Hundreds of incarcerated individuals will be relocated to other in-state institutions at least through CY 2021.
- COVID-19 continues to limit participation in educational programming.
- Quality and completeness of DOC data

Resources Needed

- Access to incarcerated students and alumni
- Access to DOC decision-makers and educational and library providers
- Access to relevant data

Milestones and Timelines

DOC will submit its collaborative report to the legislature and governor December 1, 2021. OCO will then assess uptake plans with milestones with DOC and educational and library providers for the upcoming year.